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A COMMONPLACE IN CORNEILLE'S *MÉLITE*: THE MADNESS OF ÉRASTE

The plot of *Mélite*, the first play of Pierre Corneille, is well known: Éraсте, who loves Méлите, introduces to her his friend Tircis, who thereupon supplants him in the young lady's affections. The first lover, in despair, resolves to get Tircis out of his way by preparing forged love letters from Méлите to Philandre. At first his trick seems to succeed. When Tircis sees the forged letters in the hands of Philandre he believes that Méлите is untrue to him and runs away, speaking of committing suicide. When Méлите hears this she swoons. Éraсте is now informed of the tragic consequences of his forgery. He goes mad with love and remorse, and believes himself in the infernal regions, where he hunts for his Méлите. His ravings continue through several scenes of the fourth and the fifth acts. Finally he comes to his senses and learns that his supposed victims, Tircis and Méлите, are still alive and have resolved upon their marriage. He confesses his guilt, obtains his pardon and the hand of Tircis' sister, Cloris.

In his *Examen de Méлите* of 1660, Corneille confessed that the madness scenes of his first play were not original: "La folie d'Éraсте n'est pas de meilleure trempe. Je la condamnois dès lors en mon âme; mais comme c'étoit un ornement de théâtre qui ne manquoit jamais de plaire et se faisoit souvent admirer, j'affectai volontiers ces grands égarements."¹

During the quarrel of the *Cid*, one of Corneille's bitterest opponents, Claveret, wrote: "Ceux qui considéront bien vostre fin de Méлите, c'est à dire la frénésie d'Éraсте, que tout le monde avoue franchement estre de vostre invention, et qui verront le peu de rapport que ces badineries ont avec ce que vous avez dérobé, jugeront sans doute que le commencement de la *Mélite* . . . n'est pas une pièce de vostre invention."² This statement is clearly ironical.³

¹ Corneille (ed. Marty-Laveaux), I, 139.

² Gasté, *La Querelle du Cid*, p. 309.

³ Marty-Laveaux took this statement literally: "Bien que Claveret ne conteste pas à Corneille l'invention de la frénésie d'Éraсте," etc. (I, 227, n. 1).

Claveret means that everyone was aware of the imitations of Corneille in the "frénésie d'Éraste." Marty-Laveaux pointed out that three or four verses of the ravings of Éraste bear a certain resemblance to some verses in the pastoral play *La Climène* of De la Croix;¹ and, more recently, Ulrich Meier has tried to demonstrate that Corneille took the idea of the madness of his supplanted lover from *L'Hypocondriaque* of Rotrou.² In both these plays the resemblances of the madness scenes to Corneille's *Éraste* run along general lines, so that a direct influence of either one is very problematic, the more so since similar outbursts of madmen on the stage constituted one of the commonplaces of the literature in the time of Corneille's youth. The purpose of this article is to show the extensive use of the madness device in the early seventeenth-century literature, and to point out some resemblances between Corneille's mad hero and similar heroes in the pastoral plays and the tragi-comedies of the time.

It was, in fact, the most natural thing in the world for a hero of pastoral or of tragi-comedy to become mad, attempt suicide, rush through the infernal regions, or retire to a far-off desert, when refused by, or separated from, his sweetheart. The episode was so over-worked that it was the source of no little satire, such as, for example, these verses of *Les Visionnaires* of Desmarets de Saint Sorlin (1637):

Je suis de mille amans sans cesse importunée,
Et croy qu'à ce tourment le ciel m'a destinée.
L'on vient me rapporter: Lysis s'en va mourir;
L'amour de Lysidas s'est tourné en folie;
Eurylas s'est plongé dans la mélancolie;
Si Corylas n'en meurt, il sera bien malade; . . .

[Act I, scene 2].

It would be highly repugnant to our modern taste to hear on the stage a madman, who, in well-balanced verses, invoked all the deities of the infernal regions and continued his ravings through one or two acts, as it not infrequently happened about the time of Corneille. We would condemn especially the use of madness for comic effect, such as one finds, for example, in the *Sylvanire* of Honoré d'Urfé,

¹ Played in 1627-28; editions, Paris, 1629, 1636, 1637. The play was plagiarized from the *Isabelle* of P. Ferry, 1610.

² Ueber Pierre Corneille's *Erstlingsdrama Méliete*: Festschrift des Gymnasiums zu Schneeberg, 1891, pp. 54-73.

or the *Climène* of De la Croix. But the writers of pastoral and of tragi-comedy, about 1600–1630, were sanctioned by the taste of their time and authorized by the examples which they found in antiquity and in the tragic poets of the latter part of the sixteenth century. They apparently did not feel the enormous distance, which, aesthetically speaking, separates the ravings, for example, of the Hercules of Seneca or the Saul of De la Taille, and those of a love-mad shepherd. The *Mélite* of Corneille shows this same lack of taste. Éraсте is presented as a young Parisian gentleman of about 1630. For three acts we can picture him in his light-green costume à la *Céladon*, paying to Mélite his exaggerated compliments. But when he has lost his senses, his ravings resemble those of a Greek demigod.

The succession of the incidents in the madness scenes of the *Mélite* is as follows: (1) Éraсте believes that the lightning from Olympus has burst the earth and that he is in the underworld. (2) He inquires of the Styx and of the shades if they have not seen Tircis and Mélite, whom he tries vainly to find in the infernal regions. (3) He takes his helper, Cliton, for Charon and jumps upon his back to be carried over the Styx, and in this posture is carried off the stage. (4) He fights with gods and the shades; they flee and in their haste the Parques forget their scissors. His appearance has thrown frightened Hades into confusion. (5) He takes Philandre for Minos and confesses his guilt. Finally he believes the old nurse is his mistress, Mélite, and makes ardent declarations of his love to her before he happily recovers his senses. Corneille, having entitled his play a "pièce comique" (edition of 1633), clearly tried to obtain comic effects from these ravings of Éraсте.

For the first part of his madness scenes Corneille seems to have been influenced more or less by the numerous madness scenes in the contemporary literature, and perhaps more directly by his reminiscences of Hardy's *Alcméon ou la Vengeance féminine*. In the latter play Alcméon becomes insane under the influence of a poisoned jewel. The first developments of the ravings of Éraсте and of Alcméon are almost identical:

ALCMÉON: Dieus, He! quelle voix de l'Erèbe m'appelle ?

D'où viennent parmy l'air ces flambans tourbillons ? [Hardy.]

- ÉRASTE: Quel murmure confus! et qu'entends-je hurler!
 Que de pointes de feu se perdent parmi l'air? [Corneille.]
- ALCMÉON: J'oy le choc d'un combat, je voy fondre un tonnerre
 Du faite de l'Olympe au centre de la terre. [Hardy.]
- ÉRASTE: Les Dieux à mes forfaits ont dénoncé la guerre;
 Leur foudre décoché vient de fendre la terre. [Corneille.]
- ALCMÉON: Mais la terre mugit sous mes pieds se fendant. [Hardy.]¹
- ÉRASTE: La terre à ce dessein m'ouvre son large flanc. [Corneille.]

Another point of identity between the play of Hardy and that of Corneille is that both Alcméon and Éraсте draw their swords and pursue the fleeing spirits. The former, attacking the ghosts with his sword, exclaims:

S'il faut que ma fureur contrainte se redresse,
 L'épée au poing, je puis, je le puis et le faut,
 Soutenir, repousser et vaincre cet assaut.
 Donnons, donnons sans crainte à travers de ces ombres
 Renvoyons-les, mon bras, en leur cavernes sombres.
 Couards, vous fuyez donc, vous ne m'attendez pas!²

Éraсте, who, in the earlier editions of the *Mélite*, is represented "l'épée au poing," declaims:

En vain je les rappelle, en vain pour se defendre
 La honte et le devoir leur parlant de m'attendre,
 Ces laches escadrons de fantomes affreux
 Cherchent leur assurance aux cachots les plus creux.

Éraсте describes his appearance, which has thrown all the underworld into confusion. The shades and the gods fear him and have fled:

Ma voix met tout en fuite et dans ce vaste effroi,
 La peur saisit si bien les ombres et leur roi . . .
 Tisiphone tremblante, Alecton et Mégère,
 De leurs flambeaux puants ont éteint la lumière,
 Et tiré de leur chef les serpents d'alentour,
 De crainte que leurs yeux fissent quelque faux jour, . . .
 Éaque épouvanté se croit trop en danger,
 Et fuit son criminel au lieu de le juger;
 Clothon même et ses sœurs, à l'aspect de ma lame,
 De peur de tarder trop, n'osant couper ma trame,
 À peine ont eu loisir d'emporter leurs fuseaux,
 Si bien qu'en ce desordre oubliant leurs ciseaux . . .

[pp. 230-31].

¹ *Œuvres de Hardy* (ed. E. Stengel), V, 224-25

² *Ibid.*, p. 225.

For this part of the poetic madness Corneille did not lack examples in contemporary plays. *La Rodomontade*, a tragedy by Charles Bautier, i.e., Meliglose (1605), transports its hero to the underworld, where his shadow frightens the spirits and where Charon refuses to take him aboard. This detail is reproduced in other plays, in similar circumstances, and in the *Mélite*, where Éraсте, taking Cliton for the infernal ferryman, exclaims:

Quoi! tu veux te sauver à l'autre bord sans moi!

In *La généreuse Allemande* of A. Mareschal (1630) a scene is found, also intended as comical, where a similar description is given of the terror which the mad hero pretends to inspire in the infernal regions:

Dieux! tout est en allarme en ces demeures sombres;
Un Hercule nouveau trouble encore les ombres;
Les foudres ont trouvé le chemin d'icy bas;
Les Tytans dechainent font de nouveaux combats;
Les Parques sont aux mains; le desordre s'augmente;
Cerbère s'est caché de peur chez Radamante,
Qui sous un corps fumant de souffre & de vapeur
Fuit luy-mesme, & se met sous les lois de la peur;
Icy tombe de crainte Ichare en l'onde noire;
La Tantale en fuyant passe l'eau sans en boire . . .

[Seconde journée, Act III, scene 2].

In the third act of *Les travaux d'Ulysse*, a tragi-comedy of J. G. Durval, printed at Paris without date in 1630-31, and with date in 1631, Ulysses frightens the underworld in the same way:

Les fantômes affreux ont secoué leurs fers,
Et sont tombez de peur dans le fond des enfers . . .
Les ombres de tous ceux que Cloton precipite
Dans le creux Acheron, ou dedans le Cocyte,
Et les esprits errants sur l'ardent Phlegeton,
Sont tombez de frayeur en l'Orque de Pluton . . .
J'ay fait boire Charon, qui dessus le rivage
De ses fleuves vouloit m'empescher le passage:
Et troublant de Cloton l'ordinaire repos,
J'ay rompu de despit le mestier d'Atropos.
J'ay cassé les fuseaux des parques filandières [Act III, scene 2].

After the mythological outbursts described above, Corneille's mad hero takes the old nurse for the beautiful Méлите. The eagerness

to recognize their mistress, or occasionally another person, in strangers or ghosts is a current trait in the portrayal of love-mad characters on the stage of the time. It is as general as the descent to the underworld in all the plays where madness was introduced as an "ornement de théâtre." Take, for example, the *Bergeries* of Racan (1618). Alcidor, the insane lover in this play, thinks that he is dead and already among the shades, as does Éraсте in *Mélite*; he is frightened by approaching demons or ghosts, one of whom he takes for his mistress; like Éraсте he recovers his sanity. The following passage is typical:

ALCIDOR: En quel lieu m'a conduit la cruauté du sort?
 Suis-je en terre ou dans l'eau? suis-je vivant ou mort? . . .
 Que de phantosmes vains en ces rives s'amassent!
 Sont-ce morts ou démons qui s'approchent de moy?
 Tout fait peur à mes yeux; Dieu qu'est ce que je voy?
 Belle âme, le miroir des âmes les plus belles;
 Avez-vous donc quitté vos dépouilles mortelles?
 Quels tourmens douloureux, quels funestes remors,
 Vous ont fait ennuyer dedans un si beau corps?
 Quoi! voulez-vous encor, o ma chère infidelle,
 Traverser mon repos en la nuit éternelle? . . .¹

The similarity of Corneille's method is evident if one reads these lines of the *Mélite*:

ÉRASTE (*seeing the ghosts*):
 Vous donc, esprits légers, qui, manque de tombeaux,
 Tournoyez vagabonds à l'entour de ces eaux,
 A qui Charon cent ans refuse sa nacelle,
 Ne m'en pourriez vous point donner quelques nouvelles?
 (*He takes the nurse for Mélite*)
 Je vois déjà Mélite. Ah! belle ombre, voici
 L'ennemi de votre heur qui vous cherchoit ici. . . .

With both these examples may be compared the following verses from the fifth act of the *Sylvie* of Mairêt, which is of 1628 (privilege of 1627):

FLORISEL: Mais n'est-ce pas ici le royaume des morts?
 Nos esprits n'ont ils pas abandonné nos corps?
 (*Takes a ghost for his father*)
 N'es-tu pas satisfait de nos travaux soufferts,
 Sans nous venir troubler dans les enfers?
 O père sans pitié, ton âme criminelle,
 Vient-elle icy nous faire une guerre éternelle?

¹ *Œuvres de Racan, Bib. Elzév.*, pp. 80-81.

In Hardy's pastoral play *Alphée*, the mad shepherd, Euriale, has a similar vision. In Pichou's *Folies de Cardenio*,¹ Cardenio maddened by love, takes the barber for his mistress, Luscinde. In the *Pirame et Thisbe* of Théophile de Viaud, the hero, temporarily bereft of his reason, exclaims:

Tu viens donc, inhumaine, en ces bords malheureux,
Pour espier nos esprits amoureux?

In the *Hypocondriaque* of Rotrou (played in 1628), the hero Cloridan believes he is dead, and tries to find his Perside among the souls in the underworld. He takes Cléonice at first for his sweetheart and later for a dryad. Many more examples of this traditional scene can be found in the literature which was in fashion when the young Corneille wrote his "coup d'essai." Other parts of the *Mélite*, for example, the recovery of Éraсте from madness, follow closely the convention of the stage of the time.

Although scenes of madness are to be found in the French tragedies of the sixteenth century, the fashion seems to have reached its highest point between 1610 and 1635. In the sixteenth-century tragedies, they owed their presence especially to the influence of classic example, and particularly of the *Hercules furens*, the *Medea*, and other plays of Seneca. This theme, with all its opportunities for turgid declamation, made a very strong appeal to the Renaissance poets. Various examples can be pointed out, such as the *Saul furieux* of De la Taille (performed in 1562), or the *Aman* of André de Rivaudeau (1561). In 1603, the Rouen printer, Theodore Reinsart, published a tragedy, *Ulysse*, by Jacques de Champ-Repus. In the final scenes, Télégon, crazed with remorse over his accidental killing of his father, exclaims:

Sus donc, monstres hideux, qui tenez le rivage
De l'enfer Avernai, plein d'horreur et de rage,
Vivez, tournez, riblez à mes funestes cris,
Et venez sans tarder des antres plus noircis,
Grondans, jappans, hurlant d'une façon terrible,
. . . Accablez-moy ici [*Œuvres* (ed. 1864), p. 70].

The tragedy of J. de Schélandre, *Tyr et Sidon*, in its first form (1608) ends with the madness of the unhappy king, Tiribaze, whose ravings are similar to those in the passage cited above. Other tragedies too are adorned with this "ornement de théâtre."

¹ Privilege of 1625.

The writers of tragi-comedies and pastoral plays appropriated quite naïvely these conventional madness scenes from the tragedies. Since by definition their works must end happily, they gave to these scenes a happy dénouement. Whereas the hero of the tragedy, recovering from his attack of frenzy, found around him the bleeding bodies of his victims and immediately turned to thoughts of suicide, in the tragi-comedies and the pastoral plays he suddenly recovered his reason and nothing more fatal than a marriage resulted. In 1569, François de Belleforest published his *Pastorale amoureuse* in which the shepherd, Sylvie's reason is affected by the excessive grief caused by the rejection of his advances on the part of the fair shepherdess, Camille. In 1567 Pierre le Loyer published his *Le Muet insensé, comédie en cinq actes*, in which a lover receives a charm from a magician, but through a misuse of it becomes mad. He is, in the end, happily cured. Mad lovers are especially prevalent in the plays which appeared about the time that the *Mélite* was being composed, or soon after the representation of the play, so that they may have been acted before Corneille's play. Reference has already been made to the *Bergeries* of Racan, the *Folies de Cardenio* of Pichou, plays of Hardy, the *Sylvie* of Mairet, the *Hypocondriaque* of Rotrou, and the *Généreuse Allemande* of Mareschal. In *Sylvanire ou la morte vive* of Honoré d'Urfé (privilege dated 1625), the shepherd,Adraste, becomes insane through love for the shepherdess, Doris. The anonymous play *La Folie de Silène* (1624) shows the servant of the old Polite insane, and, taking his old master for a nymph, pursuing him with ridiculous love declarations. The conventional situation also occurs in a play printed in Rouen in 1625 with the following formidable title: *Le Guerrier repenty, pastorale tragique et morale en laquelle les passions de l'homme sont manifestement représentées avec le contentement de la vie solitaire de l'hermite Hysipille; les aventureuses rencontres de la belle nymphe Rosymène, entre lesquelles reluyt le flambeau radieux de sa chasteté parmi les erreurs du Guerrier Phallacie qui, enfin touché d'un saint remord de ses meurtres sanglans, se reduit a la vie religieuse et solitaire avec Hysipille dans les déserts. Par maistre Jacques le Clerc, prestre indigne, précepteur des lettres Latines à Saint Vallery sur Somme.* In *La Carline, comédie pastorale* of Antoine Gaillard, Sieur de la Portenille (Paris, 1626) we find a shepherd, Nicot,

who is guilty of a crime of the same nature as that of Éraсте; this is also followed by scenes of remorse and insanity. *Philine ou l'amour contraire*, *Pastorale par le sieur de la Morelle*, which seems to have been played about 1628 (printed at Paris in 1630) presented the madness of Amaranthe. Liridas is a victim of this same love madness in the *Climène* of the Sieur de la Croix (1628); the same thing occurs in the *Pastoral tragi-comédie* of Caritée (Paris, 1627) and in *Cléonice, ou l'amour téméraire* (Paris, 1630). According to the Mémoire of Mahelot, the titles of three lost plays of Hardy are: *La Folie de Clidamante*, *La Folie d'Isabelle*, and *La Folie de Turlupin*. One might also compare the mad outbursts of Hérode in the *Mariamne* of Hardy, and those in the *Mariamne* of Tristan l'Hermite.

In *La Folie du Sage* of Tristan (1645) we find another form of madness: the book-and-knowledge madness. In the *Hôpital des fous* of Charles Beys, various madmen are put on the scene: a philosopher, a musician, an advocate, a soldier, an alchemist, and an astrologer. This play was first published in Paris in 1629, and is the same play as *Les Illustres fous* of 1652. As a variety we find mad ladies: for example, in *La Pèlerine amoureuse* of Rotrou (printed in 1637) imitated from the *Pellegrina* of Girolamo Bargogli, Bélie pretends to be mad to escape from a detested marriage. In the third act of the *Cléomedon* of P. du Ryer (1633 or 1634) Cléomedon, being prevented from marrying Célanire, loses his intelligence, recovers, and marries his sweetheart. In the same way Policandre loses Basile and his reason, and regains both in the *Les Aventures de Policandre et de Basile*, *tragédie par le sieur du Vieuget* (printed in 1632, played probably in 1630).

Thus the number of plays in which the mad lover was put on the scene about the time of the composition of Corneille's *Mélite*, taken in connection with the examples given in the first part of this paper, show how thoroughly the madness of Eraste in the *Mélite* conformed to a prevailing fashion in the literary production of about 1630.

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